



## Citizen Involvement—A New Way of Doing Business in Illinois Environmental Protection Programs

by

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### Introduction

Citizens are taking more of a "hands-on" role in protecting water quality in the State of Illinois. Programs that were delegated to government just a few years ago are now being planned and implemented by dedicated citizens at considerable cost savings to taxpayers. A cadre of volunteers is donating countless hours to protect the quality of their environment and their community. Citizens are organizing and working toward environmental solutions for the common good.

Citizens are not doing all this alone. They are involving all members of the community, including business and industry, civic groups, educators, environmentalists, and government. An excellent example of a citizen-based effort is a project to clean up the lake front and Waukegan Harbor, called the Waukegan Harbor Remedial Action Plan.

### Project Background

Waukegan is located 39 miles north of Chicago in Lake County, Illinois, on the west shore of Lake Michigan. Waukegan is home to 69,700 residents and is a center for business, industry, and recreation. Waukegan Harbor has about 38 acres of industrial, commercial, municipal, and open vacant lands.

The Remedial Action Plan process was initiated with the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement (GLWQA) of 1978. It requires that state and provincial governments designate geographic Areas of Concern (AOC) on the Great Lakes where conditions have caused or are likely to cause impairment of beneficial uses. The GLWQA further requires that a Remedial Action Plan (RAP) be submitted to the public and to the International Joint Commission (IJC) [see sidebar, next page] for review and comment at three stages:

1. When a definition of the problem at the AOC has been completed.
2. When remedial and regulatory measures have been selected.
3. When monitoring indicates that identified beneficial uses have been restored, although now the IJC looks for quarterly updates of progress.

Prompted by the discovery in harbor sediments of high levels of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs)—a hazardous chemical used in electrical equipment—Waukegan Harbor was designated an Area of Concern in 1981. It turned out that the harbor had the highest concentrations of PCBs of any place in the world!

## The Citizens Advisory Group (CAG)

An essential step in the success of the harbor cleanup was the establishment in August, 1990 of the Citizens Advisory Group (CAG) at the request of the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency. The CAG, made up of 26 voting members from industry, fishing and environmental interests, and residents [see sidebar, next page], was to help solve environmental problems in the area. Voting privileges and changes in membership were decided upon by the CAG. Monthly CAG meetings were open to the public. Other citizens attended CAG meetings but did not vote, nor did they ask to. When one such non-voting citizen was asked why he had stopped attending meetings, he replied that the committee was representing his interests so well, he didn't feel the need.

Such trust was not in evidence at the group's beginning. The first two meetings of the committee were acrimonious, with lots of shouting, and rumors flew about the real agenda of the Illinois EPA, the group's sponsor. However, the CAG was active and recommended numerous activities for the Stage I & II Remedial Action Plan. The IJC accepted every significant recommendation within the scope of the process. Those issues identified by the CAG that the IJC considered outside the scope, the Illinois EPA either resolved if possible under its jurisdiction or it found help to enable the committee to deal with the issue head on. The Illinois EPA's commitment to dealing with all the issues raised by the committee helped build trust over the long term.

The CAG's list of accomplishments is long and significant:

1. Participated in the preparation and review of the Stage I & II Remedial Action Plan. The IJC review was held in September of 1995 in Waukegan, and all significant recommendations within the project's scope were accepted.
2. Assisted in obtaining access to private property and federal grant funds to install eight ground-water monitoring wells in the area.
3. Co-sponsored a proposal with the Illinois EPA for a \$100,000 federal grant for follow-up monitoring (Stage III) of the harbor. Monitoring of harbor sediments, water, fish and other aquatic life will be accomplished in 1996.

## THE INTERNATIONAL JOINT COMMISSION

The International Joint Commission (IJC) is a bi-national organization established by the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909. It provides principles and mechanisms to help resolve disputes concerning water quality issues along the boundary between Canada and the United States. The Commission has three members appointed by the President of the United States and three appointed by the governor-in-council of Canada. It maintains headquarters in Ottawa, Ontario and in Washington, D.C.

4. Is participating in marsh bird and amphibian surveys concurrently with other RAPs and the Long Point Bird Observatory in Ontario, Canada. The project will begin this year.
5. Sponsored a used tire collection with the City of Waukegan in which over 3,000 tires were collected.
6. Coordinated annual beach cleanups each fall since 1991. In five beach sweeps conducted to date, 14,866 pounds of debris were collected. During the first cleanup, debris was gathered from the Waukegan River and the Waukegan North and South beaches. In the following years, debris was collected only at the beaches. Beginning in 1991, the amount of material removed has been: 4000, 2500, 3875, 2074, and 2417 pounds.
7. Sponsored household hazardous waste pickup days with Illinois EPA. In a May 20, 1995 event, approximately 1,413 households participated, and 336 55-gallon drums of hazardous material were collected.
8. Promoted emergency remedial action at the abandoned Waukegan Paint and Lacquer facility to secure and remove leaking containers of paint, solvent and other materials.

### WAUKEGAN HARBOR CITIZENS ADVISORY GROUP (CAG)

- Citizens of Lake County for Environmental Action Reform (CLEAR)
- Lake County Health Department
- City of Waukegan
- Great Lakes Sport Fishing Council
- Sierra Club, Illinois Chapter
- Outboard Marine Corporation
- League of Women Voters of Illinois
- North Shore Sanitary District
- Salmon Unlimited
- Waukegan Yacht Club
- Waukegan Port District
- Illinois Audubon Society
- College of Lake County
- Lake County Chamber of Commerce
- Waukegan Charter Boat Association
- Mary Goodley, concerned citizen
- Lake Michigan Federation
- Waukegan Port District
- Lake County Department of Planning
- Dexter Corporation
- Commonwealth Edison
- City of North Chicago
- Larsen Marine
- Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission
- North Shore Gas
- LaFarge Corporation

9. Encouraged an emergency remedial action at an area near the harbor known as the Waukegan Tar Pit. Actions were taken to remove and secure free tar, protecting wildlife from becoming entrapped.
10. Provided outreach and educational activities through tours of the area and presentations to schools and other groups. Videos of the Waukegan Harbor RAP prepared by Illinois EPA have been made available to groups and are available for loan at the Waukegan Public Library.
11. Sponsored a poster contest for area schools, with winning posters added to the Stage I & II RAP as dividers.
12. Contacted local, state, and federal legislators to gain political support for local issues, including additional maintenance dredging of the harbor by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Clearly, many of these activities cost money. The participation of some committee members was supported by their respective organizations, but most contributed on their own time—and all were strictly volunteers when it came time for the special projects such as the beach sweeps and hazardous waste pickup days. In some cases, a company would supply meeting space, food for a dinner meeting of 40 - 50 people, or T-shirts and gloves for the cleanup volunteers—no small contribution. When the committee wanted people to see the problems of the harbor from the water—a more comprehensive view—a Chamber of Commerce member found someone who owned a boat large enough to hold over 40 people and paid for the gas for a several-hour tour of the harbor. Such contributions have expanded the activities the CAG could sponsor, beyond the funding of some cleanups provided by Illinois EPA and the City of Waukegan. With this experience, the CAG is becoming more savvy at raising money.

### Conclusion

In 1993, over 1 million pounds of PCBs were successfully removed from the harbor, setting the basis for a future de-listing of the harbor as a contaminant problem. All beneficial uses have been restored, with the exception of a fish advisory which still exists for the harbor; but PCB levels have been reduced so much that it is expected that the advisory will be lifted soon. Where once the beaches were closed at least a third of the year, closures are now almost non-existent. And

with dangerous and unsightly areas cleaned up, developers are looking to build at the harbor again.

Of the 43 Areas of Concern on the Great Lakes, Waukegan Harbor was the last to start the Remedial Action Plan process and the first one done. It accomplished its goals in less than four years, while most AOCs have been in the process 8-10 years with no plan completed yet. The IJC and Illinois EPA attribute this success to the citizen committee. In fact, the IJC is telling other Areas of Concern that, rather than approach the RAP process as strictly a technical problem, they need to approach it as a communications problem, and that they need a public participation program to deal with it.

While citizen action sounds like an easy task, the diverse interests of the membership of the CAG has required extensive efforts of cooperation. Each person volunteers his or her time and talents for their own reasons. While many advisory groups have members that come to the table with confrontational attitudes that tend to slow the process, diversity of membership

can lead to a successful venture when all parties are brought together under the umbrella of a strong, non-controversial leadership, with a continued push towards the common goals and reminders of how to reach them. Success in the Waukegan Harbor Remedial Action Plan is being attained because the Citizens Advisory Group is totally committed to the common good through compromise, together with strong local leadership and state support.

In this U.S. federal election year, the theme is smaller government and balanced budgets. Environmental programs are being assailed; funding cuts by both federal and state environmental agencies will most certainly result. This can be seen as a burden or as an opportunity to local governments and environmental groups as all parties seek continued progress in protecting our precious resources. An increased local role is inevitable. But as the experience with the Waukegan Harbor shows, communities can work together in innovative ways to achieve environmental goals in times of reduced government funding.

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